

Revolt Against Oppression.

167

was the mere tool of avaricious parasites like Diana of Poitiers, the Constable Montmorency, and the Guise family. "It seemed," bitterly observes the gruff Tavannes, "as if the king had conspired with these two families to partition France in their favour, to the ruin of his children and the kingdom." It is not surprising, therefore, that even the docile French peasant was goaded into rebellion by the rapacity of the royal officials. One of the main articles of commerce of the Aquitanian towns was salt. Their inhabitants drove a lucrative trade in this article with the English, the Dutch, the Germans, before the augmentation of the *gabelle* or salt tax by Francis I. That trade had been greatly hampered by the tax and by the oppressions of the swarms of corrupt customs officials that collected it. Each family was bound to make use of a certain quantity annually, and to purchase it at the royal warehouses, at what soon became an exorbitant price. Even then the warehouse-keepers were accused of mixing the salt with sand to increase its bulk. Every family was liable to visits of inspection, and to fine, imprisonment, confiscation, in case of failure to purchase the compulsory quantity of this highly taxed, highly priced salt—often of vile quality. The people bore this exaction patiently for a time, for its loyalty, according to contemporary evidence, was not easily provoked into rebellion. It was regarded as the mule, the burden-bearer of the State. "The peasantry," remarked Suriano, "is the class most harshly treated by the king and the privileged orders (z.f., the nobles and the higher clergy). The Emperor Maximilian called the King of France the king of asses, because his subjects bore all kinds of burdens, even in peace, without complaining." Even the patience of the mule is not inexhaustible, however, and the popular anger at last broke out in revolt. In 1548 some of these salt purveyors were slain, and a party of Gascon soldiery having punished this popular outburst with atrocious severity, the peasants of Barbesieux and the neighbouring villages burst open the prison of Chateauneuf and freed the victims of the salt tax tyranny. The King of Navarre, governor of Guienne, having sent a company of troops to repress the rebels, the whole region sprang to arms, and successfully defied his

authority. The cry of "Death to the
gabclleurs" resounded far and